Emerging Trends in Technology: The Education Station

DELIVERING TECHNOLOGY ACCESS TO AMERICA'S COMMUNITIES

With more than 1,200 centers throughout the United States, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, Neighborhood Networks increases technology access for residents of HUD insured and assisted housing. Neighborhood Networks centers are always finding innovative ways to deliver technology access. For example, the Polis Foundation recently developed a progressive alternative to a stationary computer laboratory by creating the Education Station, a mobile computer lab.

The original Education Station was a campaign bus used by Jared Polis, vice chair of the Colorado State Board of Education. After his successful 2000 campaign for the board's at-large seat, Polis donated the bus to his foundation, which promotes statewide technology education. The foundation outfitted the bus with computers and special software designed for younger end users, and the Education Station began delivering its free services to Colorado schools in May 2001. During the first year, the bus traveled to elementary and middle schools statewide. In the program's second year, the foundation purchased a new bus and six Sony VAIO laptop computers, and added a color printer and an overhead projector. However, in order to reduce gasoline and upkeep expenses, the travel area was limited to the 15 school districts surrounding the foundation's Boulder headquarters.

According to program director Shana Hyer, the Education Station's goal is to help integrate technology into classroom curriculum. "We want to get [students and teachers] excited about computers and technology," she says. To this end, Education Station staff tailor their lessons to each school and grade level. They contact teachers before scheduled visits and ask about projects on which students are currently working. "We speak with the teachers and find out how we can incorporate their classroom lessons into our time with the students," Hyer explains. This process helps build

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a bridge between the technology the students access on the Education Station and what they learn when they return to their classrooms.

Education Station computers also have special software for various age groups. Younger students use Starfall.com, an interactive learn-to-read program designed by Polis' father, Dr. Stephen Schutz. (This free online resource is available at Neighborhood Networks centers with Internet access.) Because the Education Station's computers currently do not have online capabilities, the students use a static version of the Starfall Web site. Second- and third-grade students can use the Toolfactory Word Processor, which Hyer describes as "word processing with a twist." Students learn how to format reports with color, graphics, photographs, audio, and video. Fourth- and fifth-grade students can use the Toolfactory Multimedia Lab, which teaches them how to build Web sites. Education Station staff often download photographs and illustrations, based on information about what students are currently studying. They then help students build Web sites based on their schoolwork.

For older students, Education Station computers include Adobe PhotoShop. Hyer notes that several middle school yearbook teachers have requested visits from the Education Station to teach their students how to use this popular image manipulation program. Students learn how to transform digital photographs of themselves, taken by the program instructor at the beginning of the lesson. "The kids learn how to create cool backgrounds for their photos, which we then print for them on our color printer," Hyer explains.

The Education Station has gained quite a following since its inception. Patty Barber, student achievement specialist and technology specialist at Cottonwood Creek Elementary School, says that for students who do not have computer access at home, the advantages of the Education Station are immense. "Our kids absolutely love [the program] . . . . They're given the opportunity to use new software and new computers to reinforce concepts that are being delivered in the classroom."

Because Education Station instructors make the experience such fun, Barber says her students enjoy their time on the bus. "[Students] think it's 2 hours of continuous 'playing around' on computers."

Normalee Lee, technology coach for Malley Drive and Federal Heights elementary schools, commends the program's impact on teachers. "The greatest thing is when teachers ask when we can

bring the bus back," Lee says. "Education Station visits stimulate teachers' interest in the available technology and start their creative juices flowing." Several teachers now use the Starfall Web site for their reading classes, and one teacher is currently working with Toolfactory software to help his classes build Web sites about the space program. Lee also praises the new bus's increased accessibility: "The new Education Station is wheelchair accessible so my special needs children can now participate."

Both Barber and Lee look forward to future visits from the Education Station. "They're very accommodating," says Lee. "I've had excellent experiences with them." Barber concurs: "I can't say enough nice things about Shana Hyer and the Jared Polis Foundation." NN

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Mark-to-Market Program Encourages Building of Neighborhood Networks Centers

Ensuring an abundant supply of safe and affordable housing has never been an easy job, but the expiration of 20-year Section 8 contracts, which began in 1997, has complicated the fulfillment of one pillar of HUD's founding mission. However, with the development of the Mark-to-Market program, HUD and its Office of Multifamily Housing have addressed the problem of these expiring contracts.

Mark-to-Market is designed to bring the interests of the Department and owners of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and HUD insured multifamily property in line. The authority, along with the program, tools, and the Office of Multifamily Housing Assistance Restructuring (OMHAR), was established by an act of Congress and signed into law by the President to address the problem of expiring above-market contracts and the need to preserve the

affordable housing stock. HUD built the organization and determined the best approach to implement the law was through debt restructuring that meets current owner financial realities and a range of owner incentives created to reward owner participation, strengthen the marketability of their properties, and enhance the level of services and opportunities available to residents of HUD insured properties. One of the major incentives is designed to encourage and help owners build new community meeting space that is often used for a Neighborhood Networks center.

As owners of multifamily properties begin the process of restructuring their debt through the Mark-to-Market program, they are presented with an opportunity to make significant additions to their property. In most cases this includes the addition of air conditioning or elevators where none exist and the building of community meeting space that can be used for a Neighborhood Networks center. These significant additions to the property are encouraged by the Department and made more affordable by HUD financing of up to 97 percent of the cost of the building project. This contrasts with the 80-percent financing that HUD provides for other rehabilitation and restoration building projects to upgrade the property to today's standards.

In many cases the addition of a Neighborhood Networks center can enhance the marketability of the property and attract residents who might otherwise choose other market-rate rental property in their city. The 97-percent financing that HUD provides can be used to build the space for the center, upgrade the wiring to support today's technology, and cover the cost of salaries to staff the new facility. The only limitation is that financing cannot be used to cover the cost of capital equipment such as computers, tables, or chairs.

Bob Sampson, a managing agent with Interstate Realty Management, notes that Interstate has developed Neighborhood Networks centers at several of its complexes using the Mark-to-Market restructuring.

"We've successfully worked with the OMHAR underwriting, which includes the cost of professional staffing for supportive services," he says. "Without those underlying services, you can't sustain any long-term tenant involvement. If you can't afford to do those, you can't afford to go to the next step to establish a Neighborhood Networks center. We established more than a decade ago that supportive services are critical to the quality of affordable housing."

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>
> *Bob Sampson, managing agent*

"We've been successful in that regard in having the ongoing expense of maintaining a supportive services program and a Neighborhood Networks center included as operating expenses of the property," Sampson says. "And, therefore, they are included in the rents."

For others who would like to add a community space or learning center, Sampson notes that owners have to be a little more resourceful in coming up with funds to cover capital expenses for hardware, software, and furniture, which are not included in the Mark-to-Market refinancing.

To qualify for the Mark-to-Market program, current owners of multifamily housing must meet the strict requirements established by the legislation. The criteria are:

- FHA insured debt currently on the property;
- Section 8 contract in effect; and
- Contract rents above comparable market rents.

Certain owners may be ineligible due to participation limitations, such as suspension or debarment from HUD ownership, and some properties may be exempt due to state or local bond financing that precludes refinancing.

Many owners who have participated in the Mark-to-Market program have already taken advantage of the financing and now operate Neighborhood Networks centers that fulfill the needs of their residents and help to enhance their properties. ▪

Strengthening Programs With Resident Involvement

The success or failure of a Neighborhood Networks center often hinges on the level of resident involvement in the creation of activities, the operation of programs, and the formation of structures that encourage broad input for future program development. Resident involvement in Neighborhood Networks centers often takes the form of volunteers and paid staff who engage in formal and informal work designed to improve center programs. Successful centers ensure that residents are involved in planning activities and services, providing support for programs, and assessing the effectiveness and direction of current and future programs.

At many sites, residents are involved as staff, either full time, part time, or volunteer, helping to run programs and activities that reflect and serve the needs of the community. These relationships help residents influence center operations and direct program development that responds to their neighbors' desires. The employment of residents provides a powerful way for local residents to influence the development of programs and offers them the means to ensure that programs are responsive to their needs. When residents are involved in the needs assessment, the center is able to attract and create programs that directly address the desires of center participants, resulting in more effective program delivery.

Programs that are responsive to resident interests help sustain resident involvement through resident resource investment and build a stronger sense of community ownership. "The residents in our community are involved at all levels of the center's operation and play a vital role in creating unity among the diverse population that we serve," relates Kimberly Timms, center director at the Oasis Computer Learning Center in Fort Worth, Texas. "When residents are involved in program planning and implementation, they begin to take pride and feel a sense of ownership in their center," adds Timms.

Matching resident resources with resident interests to create new programs or invigorate existing ones is easier when those who use the service are involved in the decisionmaking process at all levels. Resident advisory boards and monthly resident meetings are useful for building a sense of community ownership of the Neighborhood Networks center and its programs, and create an atmosphere of vitality that aids in the long-term success of the center. No matter how relevant or attractive the programs a center creates, if the community it serves does not feel actively engaged, program attendance will decline and services will eventually be discontinued from lack of use.

No two Neighborhood Networks centers are alike and the needs of each community are unique as well. The flexibility of the Neighborhood Networks initiative allows residents, property owners, and managers to tailor a center and its programs to meet the needs of the community. "We really prosper as a community and are responsive to the needs of all individuals because we talk to and listen to the people using the center," Timms says. Achieving long-term center sustainability involves residents in every phase of planning from assessing needs to program development and evaluation. When residents are treated as partners rather than passive recipients, they will

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provide straightforward information about their individual needs and desires as well as collective goals for the center's success.

Successful centers involve residents at all levels of the operation by placing them on the center's steering committee, holding brainstorming sessions about programs, creating opportunities for residents to actively participate in the development of center programs, and hiring residents who have successfully used the center. Successful centers also keep residents fully informed about all activities, which sustains trust, support, and involvement. "It took me more than 2 years to develop the trust of the residents but now I know that I can rely on them and they feel comfortable with my opinion. We have created a real community that is responsive to the neighborhood's needs," concludes Timms.

People Connect With E-Government

E lectronic or e-government, which is the transfer of government information and services over the Internet, is giving citizens greater access to their local, state, and federal governments. As an Internet-based tool, e-government is a two-way highway for receiving and sending information. Whether you want to read a government publication or regulation, download a form, or find out when the city council meets, government Internet sites can provide this information. E-government also enables citizens to send comments, submit applications, or ask questions of government officials and agencies.

HUD and the city of Arlington, Texas, provide two interesting examples of e-government at the federal and local levels.

HUD's E-Government Initiatives

HUD's *Electronic Government Strategic Plan* outlines how the Department is transforming the way it does business with citizens and its business partners, such as housing authorities, banks and mortgage companies, other government agencies, industry groups, and nonprofits.

- New portal technologies provide better integration with lenders, brokers, and other business partners as well as one-stop solutions for citizens interested in finding housing or doing business with HUD.

- New payment systems provide faster and more efficient means to settle accounts with suppliers and contractors and disburse federal funds to grantees.

- New interactive database capabilities and handheld technologies provide opportunities to better enforce housing laws, monitor compliance, and reduce fraud, waste, and abuse.

- Among HUD's e-government goals and initiatives related to Neighborhood Networks are using Web-based technology to increase homeownership, the availability of affordable rental housing, and equal opportunity.

  HUD's Web site, launched in 1995, contains information from all of HUD's programs and offices, links to thousands of informative Web sites, and innovative features such as online live and taped broadcasts of training sessions. Using HUD's Web site, citizens can file housing discrimination complaints, search for HUD-approved lenders, scan listings of HUD homes for sale, participate in online discussions, and create maps showing government activity in their neighborhood.

- Future initiatives include a **renters' portal** to help citizens search for affordable rental units, **eVouchers** to enable the public to apply for Section 8 vouchers and certificates directly online or by phone, and increasing access, knowledge, skills, and technology usage by low-income citizens and HUD beneficiaries.

In the future HUD's Sharing Technology project will deliver a wide variety of software and hardware technology to HUD beneficiaries through community-based organizations.

With more than 1,200 centers nationwide, Neighborhood Networks brings technology to low- and moderate-income citizens. More than 100 touchscreen HUD kiosks, installed in public places throughout the country, provide basic information about HUD programs and services to citizens who may not have Internet access. Because most kiosks are located in places with weekend hours, users do not have to wait for a HUD office to be open to get basic information.

Local E-Government

Planning and housing agencies in many communities use the Internet to provide citizens with information, to publicize public meetings, and to gather citizens' views on plans and proposals. Submitting online applications for grants or permits is a growing option in many localities.

In Arlington, Texas, the Internet is enhancing citizen participation in comprehensive planning and zoning:

- The Arlington 2025 Visioning Web site *(www.ci.arlington.tx.us/ planning/comprehensive/Arlington2025.html)* offers citizens many opportunities to participate online in developing the city's comprehensive plan. More than 170 citizens responded to the online 2025 Vision and Goals Survey, which was available in English, Vietnamese, and Spanish. In addition, more than 100 people signed up to discuss issues relating to Arlington's future on an Internet discussion board.

- The Arlington Planning Department's Zoning Web site *(www.ci. arlington.tx.us/planning/zoning.html)* links citizens to information on current zoning cases; forms, fees, and schedules; the city zoning ordinance; and zoning district information.

Challenges and Opportunities

Some of the major challenges to making e-government available to more citizens include:

- Increasing access to computers and the Internet for low-income citizens; and

- Extending e-government more effectively to people with disabilities, limited reading ability, or limited knowledge of English.

Community technology centers, public libraries, and schools are addressing these challenges. Neighborhood Networks centers provide computer access in communities where many families do not own personal computers. Many centers also provide English as a Second Language classes for recent immigrants or adapt computer equipment for users with disabilities. ▪

For more information about e-government, go to:

- The President's e-Government initiative at *www.whitehouse.gov/ omb/egov;*

- HUD's *Guide to e-Government* at *www.hud.gov/offices/ cio/egov/tri-fold.pdf;*

- HUD's e-Government Web page at *www.hud.gov/offices/cio/ egov/index.cfm;* and

- HUD's *Electronic Government Strategic Plan* at *www.hud.gov/ offices/cio/egov/splan.pdf.*

Consortia Corner

This regular feature explores Neighborhood Networks consortia: what they are and what they provide, how to start a consortium and recruit members, how to market your consortium, and strategies for sustaining it. This issue of Consortia Corner focuses on the startup strategies of Digital Promise, a successful Washington State consortium.

How Digital Promise Began

In 1995, when HUD launched the Neighborhood Networks initiative, Diana Goodwin-Shavey, HUD director of multifamily housing in Seattle, was assigned to lead the initiative in that area. She publicized the advantages of onsite Neighborhood Networks centers to the many housing managers and owners that she knew in Seattle in several ways. For example, Goodwin-Shavey and one of her staff, Tarrie Eckhart, organized monthly brown bag lunches to bring together owners, managers, center directors, and volunteers. They invited local businesses and nonprofit groups to present interesting topics that helped make it worth people's time to attend. Presenters included:

- Educational software vendors, who outlined how to provide their resources to low-income populations;

- Groups with surplus hardware or software, who explained how centers could obtain access;

- Property owners with onsite centers, who told their peers about benefits such as less isolation for elderly residents and reduced vandalism because youth have a place to go after school; and

- HUD staff, who discussed federal resources, including how grants and other community resources could help cover Neighborhood Networks center expenses.

As more owners and managers started embracing Neighborhood Networks, Goodwin-Shavey hosted a series of meetings between HUD, the Affordable Housing Management Association, and private owners and managers. The Washington State Neighborhood Networks Consortium eventually evolved from this group.

By 1997, the consortium had 35 member centers and had secured nonprofit status as a 501(c)(3) organization. Expanding beyond its HUD roots, the organization changed its name to Digital Promise and began fostering relationships with new organizations, such as

rural apartment owners and managers, faith-based housing providers, and transitional housing providers. Working with its partners, Digital Promise has helped start and maintain more than 50 computer labs and distributed an estimated $100,000 in hardware, equipment, software, and technical assistance.

Drawing on Digital Promise's experience, President Joe Diehl offers some effective startup strategies for owners and managers interested in developing new consortia.

NN: If owners or managers live in areas without Neighborhood Networks consortia, how would you advise them to start developing one?

Diehl: I would recommend that they start with their local industry association, such as the local chapter of the National Affordable Housing Management Association (NAHMA)[1] to find other managers and owners in their area.

NN: What other groups would you recommend approaching to start a new consortium?

Diehl: It is important to contact local businesses and nonprofits, such as groups serving the elderly and disabled, technology companies, or banks, to ask them to join the consortium and to serve on its board of directors. Even if they do not come very often to meetings, these representatives give your consortium ties to and increased visibility in the greater community. Digital Promise, for example, has a Microsoft representative on its board.

Involving HUD in forming a consortium is also important. As mentioned, the Seattle director of multifamily housing, Diana Goodwin-Shavey, was instrumental in starting the Washington State Neighborhood Networks Consortium. Today, Tarrie Eckhart, HUD Neighborhood Networks Coordinator for the Multifamily Northwest/Alaska Hub, is very supportive of Digital Promise and provides meeting space at HUD for the quarterly meetings.

NN: How did Digital Promise put together its application for nonprofit 501(c)(3) status?

Diehl: Because it takes about $500 to have a law firm or certified public accountant put together a 501(c)(3) application, we approached the University of Washington School of Law. Students

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Joe Diehl, president, Digital Promise

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[1] The NAHMA Web site **www.NAHMA.org** lists local chapters throughout the country.

interested in community service projects volunteered to do our Internal Revenue Service (IRS) application. There is also a $500 IRS filing fee, so we passed the hat at a Digital Promise meeting and members shared this cost.

NN: How did you first raise funds to hire staff?

Diehl: In the beginning we received a couple of local grants and also earned income as a contractor for a city technology project. For the past 5 years, VISTA volunteers have helped provide staff. We have also received funding from the Washington State Housing Finance Commission, the local chapter of NAHMA, the Corporation for National Service, and the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods.

NN: What are some of the biggest challenges for keeping consortium members involved?

Diehl: Today everyone is spread thin, and budgets are tight for property owners, nonprofit groups, and public agencies, so it gets more and more difficult for people to attend meetings, including consortium meetings. Digital Promise also covers a fairly large geographic area, from Seattle to Spokane.

Given the problems of limited time and money to attend meetings, we are looking to new meeting formats such as conference calls, e-mail, virtual meetings, online updates, or other technology innovations to replace person-to-person meetings. Once, only three people showed up for a meeting. Rather than disband, we decided that if people were voting with their feet not to attend, we needed to come up with meetings that were more interesting and worth people's time. Technology is changing rapidly, and we decided we needed to be in better touch with those changes. NN

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The success of an individual center relies on close interaction between those who operate the facility and those who benefit from the activities. Owners, managers, and center directors benefit from the input that residents make in directing the programs that affect their daily lives as they move toward self-sufficiency.